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A CALL

TO THE

G O S P E L M I N I S T R Y .

WHAT CONSTITUTES IT.

BY THE

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GOSPEL MINISTRY.

WHAT is it? Is it of God, and with his seal and signature patent; or is it in the ordinary way in which divine Providence calls men to other useful occupations? This is a question of great practical importance. The preaching of the gospel is one of the divinely chosen means of salvation; we may say—the principal means; and its efficiency, as we learn from Scripture and experience, depends much, under divine power, on the authority and character of the preacher. There is a deal of truth in the old adage, “Whom God appoints, he anoints.” The Saviour guaranties to his church pastors and teachers for her edification and enlargement, and pledges his presence and patronage to them, in continuance, until the whole work whereunto he sends them shall be accomplished. See the ground of our hope in this matter, as stated by Paul, Ephesians iv. 11—13, and by the Evangelist, Matthew xxviii. 19 and 20. In the first of these passages we have a guaranty of ministers for the edifying of the body of Christ, “till *we all come*, in the unity of the faith,

and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." In the second, we have the assurance from the lips of the Redeemer himself, that he will be with those *whom he sends* to the end of time—"Lo! I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world"—ratified by a solemn and emphatic amen. The call is of God. No man taketh this honour unto himself; whoever engages in this work on his own motion, and without a divine commission, is presumptuous and intrusive.

But how is the call made out? and by what marks or evidences is its genuineness ascertained? How is a man to know that he is called of God? and upon what ground is the church to recognize him as an ambassador of Christ? Is the call so palpable and convincing as to leave no room for doubt or hesitancy? Is the man made to feel that he *must* enter the ministry or jeopard his peace with God, and encounter the divine malediction? or is it like our call into the kingdom of grace, capable of being made more sure to ourselves and others, than at first, by self-examination—i. e. by bringing our motives and experience to the test of those marks and characteristics of discipleship which are laid down in the Scriptures? This is the question on which we propose to offer a few remarks, mainly in the hope of drawing forth the views of others—that by a comparison of ideas we may get at the truth, and under its guidance, unite with renewed zeal in our endeavours to secure labourers of the right spirit, and in adequate numbers, to gather in the great gospel harvest.

IMPORTANT DISTINCTION.

IN considering the divine method of providing for the wants of the church, we must keep in mind the distinction between the ordinary and the extraordinary measures adopted for her growth and prosperity. At the introduction of the Christian dispensation, and before the canon of Scripture was embodied, or a model of church organization and government furnished, the power and presence of God were direct and manifest. Christ called his first ministers in person, and his word was instantly obeyed; they left all and followed him straightway, and under his teachings, were fitted for the work assigned them. Paul was enlisted in a still more extraordinary manner. Taken in his unregenerate state and hostile attitude, his change of heart and call to the ministry were simultaneous; and being an educated man, and receiving directly from the exalted Redeemer his commission and instructions, he entered immediately on his work, without conferring with flesh and blood. He felt that a moral necessity was laid upon him to preach the gospel, and that a woe impended over him if he faltered or demurred at the heavenly vision; so of Timothy, Titus, and others. But, in process of time, the gospel takes effect—churches are gathered and organized—the Scriptures are collected and embodied, filled with divine promises and counsels, and committed to the church as her rule of faith and practice. Now, in this change of circumstances, what are the people of God to *expect*, and what have they to *do*, that the

kingdom of the "Anointed One" may be built up, and his truth and grace pervade the world, and win men to the obedience of faith? Are labourers for the vineyard furnished, now-a-days, *miraculously*, and with such light and power as cannot be doubted or resisted? or, are they brought into the service from the ranks of professed disciples, of course, by the use of means under the leadings of Providence and in answer to prayer offered continually to the Lord of the harvest? The former hypothesis seems to us to be encumbered with several difficulties, as—

1. It gives a claim to be received as a religious teacher, upon evidence which cannot be submitted to others, that they may judge of its validity, unless miracles be wrought in attestation of the mission, as in the case of Christ and his apostles. The man thinks he is moved by the Spirit of God to preach; but he may be deluded, or he may be a deceiver; how are we to know? The evidence of his authority lies within his own bosom; we cannot appreciate it; it may be satisfactory to him, but cannot be so to us. Does not the theory in question open a door for all manner of imposture and fanaticism? And are we not warned by the history of the past, and bound by a regard for the peace and purity of the church, to insist on evidence of a call to the ministry of which we can judge?

2. This notion of an *imperative* and *invincible* call to the ministry, supersedes and sets aside the right which the church has long claimed, to *examine* candidates for the sacred office. What right have we to question God's ambassadors?

The apostles, indeed, submitted their credentials in the signs and wonders that attended their ministrations ; but, in the case we are combatting, the credentials are not to be seen—they are locked up in the messenger's own consciousness—we cannot inspect them or judge of their validity on any rational ground. It would seem, therefore, that we are bound to recognize every new-comer, on his mere *ipse dixit*, and submit ourselves to his teachings accordingly. Now this is directly and entirely against our received principles and practice. We examine candidates on their religious experience, and their motives in seeking the ministry ; we subject them, ordinarily, to years of trial, as to their doctrine and aptness to teach, and hold them liable to be rejected after all, if deemed unfit for the office. Is this right ? Certainly not, if the theory in question be correct ; for to say that the evidence of a valid call consists of the candidate's sense of obligation, together with the approbation of the church and the sanction of her judicatories—and that these are the forms through which the call is *declared* to be *authentic*, when the *sole ground* of such declaration is *the man's testimony concerning himself and his mission*, seems to us a very vague and inconclusive way of reasoning.

3. The idea of a clear and irresistible call conflicts, we think, with historical fact, and the testimony of many of the best men that have ever exercised the ministerial office since the apostolic age. Read the history of the church in its various denominations, and mark with what fear and trembling her best ministers have approached the sacred office. Ask those now among you, whether

they assumed their official station under a *pressing* and *imperative* call of God, that left no doubt upon their minds that they were in the right way, and going to the very work assigned them—and very few, we apprehend, will be prepared to give you a prompt answer in the affirmative.

4. The last objection to a peremptory call, that we shall notice at present, is, that if it be true, in regard to the *preaching* ministry, the same principle is applicable to *ruling* elders and deacons. These are essential elements in our plan of church polity. How are they furnished? Are they sent forth without any agency or pains-taking on our part? No, we look out for them among the disciples. We select, after due consultation, the best qualified, and set them apart to their respective offices with prayer and suitable instructions. Here are three classes of office-bearers, all needful for the well-being of the church, and coming under the generic appellation of ministers; are they not all to be expected in the same way, and in the prayerful use of like means? Why should there be a distinction in the mode of a call, between the first class of officers and the other two, when their duties are so closely connected, and are designed to promote the same end, the edification of the body of Christ and the salvation of souls? Are not men called to the several departments of the sacred ministry on the same plan of Providential direction and care that secures the ultimate prosperity of the church, and warrants the hope that no weapon lifted against her shall prosper? If a call to the *preaching* ministry differed from a call to any other public service due to the church,

we would expect to find the difference clearly defined in Scripture. Is it there? If it be, and we have overlooked it, we should be thankful to any one who will point us to chapter and verse. It will not be satisfactory to adduce the case of the apostles and primitive preachers. They belonged to an age of miracles. Their call was, confessedly, direct, immediate and indubitable; but *we* live under an established government, we have the written law and testimony, to which we are required to look, as to a settled and complete rule of faith and practice. What is *now* the divine method of providing and sending forth ministers of the word? Is it by a mighty impulse, that cannot be resisted; a voice from the excellent glory, that none can hear, save he to whom it is addressed; a vision of the night, when deep sleep falleth upon men? We cannot believe it; but we *do* believe it is by a providential influence, acting through means, and attaining the *end* with infallible certainty, yet in a way consistent with man's free-agency, and perfectly analogous to what we see in God's plan of governing and providing for his rational and accountable creatures. The call is of God in this qualified sense; it is *mediate*, that is, through advisors, particularly through the church, in her executive officers, or judicatories.

Thus our idea of a call to the ministry is disclosed, so far as relates to its source and authority. It is from God, and may not be neglected with impunity. We proceed now to inquire how it is made out, that is, how it is ascertained to the person called, and others concerned. This is not

effected ordinarily by a voice within, or a light from heaven, which admits of no doubt or hesitancy; but rather by the induction of particulars, and with various degrees of evidence, according to the circumstances of each case. There is nothing miraculous or supernatural in the matter, unless all providential dispensations be so regarded. And here it is proper to observe, that God manifests for the most part his wisdom, in selecting the most suitable means for the accomplishment of his purposes. On this principle the divine call to the ministry, we suppose, is limited to such as have been called into the kingdom of grace. Godless men are not called upon to do the work of an ambassador for Christ. Indeed, it were preposterous, as it is presumptuous, in any man, to aim at the Christian ministry, before he has given his heart to God, and embraced the Saviour. It would be like the blind undertaking to lead the blind, absurd, uncomfortable, and perilous. Who, in his senses, would voluntarily bind himself to a service, for which, in his own consciousness, he has neither relish nor fitness? To serve a master that we neither know nor love, is the last and lowest species of drudgery of which we can conceive; and must prove, in the end, alike uncomfortable to the servant and disastrous to the interests of the master.

But if, after a season of earnest inquiry and painful conflict, you are enabled to dedicate yourself to the Lord;—if, feeling your obligations to redeeming love, you really wish to live and labour for him who died for you;—if, upon asking your new and chosen Master what he would have you

to do;—if, in these circumstances and with these feelings, the ministry of reconciliation attracts your notice, and you find a strong inclination to it, and a decided preference for it, with all its solemn responsibilities and self-sacrificing hardships, it is *very likely* God is calling you to the work. We say *very likely*, because in most cases the call is not quite clear and satisfactory at first. When you look at the magnitude of the office, and the qualifications for it, as described in the Scriptures, and then think of your weakness and lack of fitness for so great a work, you may find occasion for some hesitancy and doubt. But if you submit yourself to God, when he asks, as he does in the holy oracle, Isaiah vi. 8, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” with a heart-felt, “Here am I, send me,” he will, very probably, qualify you, and send you forth in due time, with your commission fully made out by the testimony of your conscience, the approbation of the Church, and the sanction of her divinely instituted ordaining authorities. If, with a heart moved by love to Christ, and the souls of men, and with a settled conviction that he is the only Saviour, you have set your face towards the ministry of his gospel, let nothing divert you from your high purpose, while your honest desire and the indications of Providence seem to lead you in that direction.

You may not have the requisite qualifications now; but if you have capacity, and the spirit of the office, you can obtain them by prayer and proper exertions. The way, you may hope, will clear up before you, as you advance in your preparation for the work. Even “the apostle to the gentiles,”

whose call was with special power, and with such a blaze of light as blinded and prostrated him, was directed to go into Damascus, and learn from the teachings and ministrations of Ananias, the full import of the heavenly vision, that brought him to the feet of Jesus. It was in the house of Judas, where he prayed, and was baptized, after some days of blindness and fasting, that his eyes were opened—that he received strength, and learned from the Lord's ministering servant, how great things he was to do and suffer for the name and honour of Jesus. Think how many have entered upon the work with fear and trembling, who afterwards found themselves greatly honoured, as instruments in the hand of the Spirit, of winning souls and edifying the body of Christ. You will know your call, if you follow on to know it by self-devotion, diligence and prayer. The harvest is plenteous, the field is the world, and the work is too much for an angel; but "our sufficiency is of God," and we lean on the strong word of promise, "Lo, I am with you alway."

1. The foregoing view of a call to the gospel ministry, which, as we have endeavoured to show, harmonizes with Scripture and historical fact, suggests several practical lessons to the church, to education societies, to teachers of youth, and to parents.

The church, as a body, relying on the promise of her blessed Lord, expects, for her edification and enlargement, pastors and teachers: these are essential, by divine appointment, to her growth and prosperity. But *how* is she to expect them? Just as she is warranted to look for other good

gifts from the Father of lights, through the use of appropriate means. Not by waiting *passively*, and *without* concern for the heavenly boon; nor by praying the Lord of the harvest *merely*, that he will thrust them forth, though this is never to be neglected, but by suitable pains-taking in the right training of her children, looking for and bringing forward materials, out of which ministers may be constituted as the Lord shall choose. The kingdom of grace is a kingdom of means. Faith, without works, is dead. "Why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things that I command you?" Peter was charged to feed the *lambs* as well as the sheep of the flock, in evidence of his avowed love to the good Shepherd. The church revives and advances by the divine blessing on her own exertions. She goes forth sowing the precious seed of divine truth beside all waters, and God gives the increase. She dedicates her offspring to the Lord, not only by baptism, but by prayer and discipline, watching over them with sleepless vigilance, teaching and commanding them to keep the Sabbath holy, to mind their *chief end*, and lay hold on eternal life, by embracing the Saviour and remembering their Creator in the days of their youth.

This early training of a seed to serve the Lord, it should be carefully noted, is a matter of vital importance to the interests of the Redeemer's kingdom. It is not a work to be accomplished by a few feeble or fitful efforts. It is a work of faith, and a labour of love; it is to be pursued, "line upon line, precept on precept," systematically, perseveringly, and with all prayer and sup-

plication. It seems indispensable, therefore, that the church should have her Schools, Academies, Colleges, Seminaries, and General Board of Education, that by means of these organizations she may secure due attention to revealed truth, and Christian ordinances and obligations, through the whole course of instruction. Thus a foundation will be laid for genuine revivals, especially among our youth; and from the fruits of these precious seasons of refreshing from the presence of the Lord we may expect large and desirable accessions to the number of our candidates for the ministerial office. So it has been in times past, and so will it be again, when the people of God awake to their duty, fulfil their covenant engagements, and feel their obligations to redeeming love.

We are cheered to find that some of our colleges have experienced the reviving visits of the Holy Spirit, resulting in the hopeful conversion of souls. Of these converts, we may hope, some will offer themselves to the service of the sanctuary in the ministry of the word. May these gracious visitations of mercy be extended to all our institutions of learning, that from the ranks of those who are born of God, there shall go forth into the Lord's vineyard labourers of the right spirit, and in numbers adequate to the demand, to gather in the great harvest of souls, that are ready to perish through ignorance and sin! "The field is the world," and the demand for working men was never more pressing than just now. Not to speak of Papal Europe, or Pagan India, Africa, and China, and the peopled islands

of the great seas, our own country is filling up with a mixed population, and with a rapidity that is unprecedented and surprising, while our candidates for the ministry are not increasing in number, as appears in our statistics; whereas, to supply the places made vacant by death, and occupy the new fields opening on all sides, requires a large annual increase. This startling fact calls for serious inquiry.

What is the cause of this unpropitious state of things? Is it owing to *wrong notions in regard to a divine call* to the ministry? Are our pious young men looking for some undefined and unpromised sign from heaven, before they will venture to offer their services to the Lord as heralds of the gospel? Apprehending that there may be something in this, we have given our ideas on the subject freely, as we interpret the teachings of Scripture, experience, and providence. Is it that the *expense of such an education*, as is required for admission to the sacred office, forms a hindrance? This the Church endeavours to remove through the agency of her Board of Education. Is it that the *ministry is inadequately supported*, where its benefits are enjoyed? There is something in this, though not quite so much as some people say. A faithful pastor, who gives himself wholly to the work, will rarely suffer long in the service of his flock, for want of the needful support. Indeed, ministers in the general live as comfortably, and raise their families as decently, as do a majority of their people; so that the scantiness of support is *not*, or *ought not to be*, an insuperable obstacle to one who is

actuated by a becoming zeal for the glory of *Him* "who had not where to lay his head," and whose gospel is adapted to make the poor of this world rich in faith and heirs of his everlasting kingdom. Still, however, the support is, in many instances, more stinted than it should be; and where this evil is owing to the *cupidity* rather than the *poverty* of the people, if it be not removed, the sad and certain penalty will be "a dearth of the word of God"—a removal of the candlestick to other parts, where its cheering light will be more justly appreciated.

But aback of these, and the like hindrances to a desirable increase of candidates for the work of the ministry, there is *one* more potent and mournful than all others—we mean the too *prevalent apathy* of the church in reference to the *high concerns of religion and the salvation of souls*. We want the Spirit's influence to give efficacy to the truth, to draw us more closely and with more earnestness to the throne of grace, and to awaken our youth and bring them to Christ. Then might we expect to hear from the lips of many a new-born son of the church the anxious inquiry—"Lord, what wouldst thou have me to do?" Then would our recruits for pastoral and evangelical service be multiplied, and we should have the cheering prospect of re-enforcing our feeble missionary bands, and of meeting the urgent claims of the destitute in our own great country. Let us have faith in God, as the Hearer of prayer. His arm is not shortened, nor is his ear heavy. If he give the word and move the heart, great will be the company that shall offer themselves to publish the

glad tidings. Let the whole church be united and importunate in her prayers to the Lord of the harvest, while faithfully training her children for his service, and we are warranted to expect a blessing. Every genuine revival furnishes less or more materials for the ministry; and when our sons, whom God makes heirs of his kingdom, and subjects of his grace, reach the age for choosing a profession, let us not be backward in pointing them to the sacred office, as the best they can select, provided they *have* or *can obtain* the requisite qualifications. Christian parents are bound to do this, in faithfulness to the cause of Christ. It is no infringement of God's prerogative. He calls men into the ministerial service, for the most part, through the agency of his people, and in answer to their prayers.

And now, in concluding these remarks, we make our appeal with earnestness and hope to our "young men in Christ," in behalf of the sacred ministry. You have been called of God, as you trust, beloved youth, into the kingdom of grace, and are cherishing a hope of glory. You are in covenant with God, and stand connected with a peculiar people, required to be zealous of good works. What are you going to do? What good work do you purpose to engage in, as the main business of life? How will you best fulfil your obligations to redeeming love? In what department of public service will you be able, by divine aid, most effectually to glorify God, and promote the interests of your fellow-men? You wish to know, doubtless, what the Lord would have you do; but how are you to know? Not

by special revelation, but by fervent prayer for divine guidance, and by a careful comparison of your talents, your tastes, and acquirements, with the duties of the several occupations that present themselves to your choice. You cannot expect to be conducted to your proper station in life by accident, or the force of circumstances. You may blunder into a wrong place, a place for which you have no fitness, where you will find yourself awkwardly situated, and be alike uncomfortable and useless all your days. The matter requires thought and decision, from right motives and in view of probable consequences. Every man is not fitted for every place. There is a diversity of gifts corresponding to the numerous occupations by which the business of the world is carried on. What is your gift? What office in the commonwealth of Israel can you fill with most satisfaction to yourself, and advantage to the cause of your Redeemer? This question you must decide; and in making up your mind, we ask you to *think of the Gospel Ministry*. It is of divine appointment, and high import. It has fair claims to your serious consideration. In its origin and design it is paramount to all other callings. It is a ministry of reconciliation. Contemplate it in this aspect. Think of its bearing on the interests of a fallen world—a world in a state of alienation from God, ignorant, idolatrous, and hopeless. But here is the word of reconciliation, destined to be proclaimed to all people. Who among you will go forth to publish the glad tidings? “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” saith the Lord. And to this voice from heaven the echo comes

back upon us, from all parts of the peopled world, "Come over and help us;" give us preachers; send us men of God to show us the way of life. Heralds of the cross are in demand everywhere, at home and abroad. We need them on the borders of our own land by scores—nay, by hundreds. And where should we look for recruits to serve under the Captain of salvation, but to the sons of the Church? Do you say you are unfurnished for the service; that you need instruction and lack the means of procuring it? If you have a heart for the work, and would willingly consecrate yourselves to it, we have schools and the means of sustaining you to the extent of your wants. Do you shrink from the responsibilities of the office in view of your own weakness? Hear the word of the Lord—"Lo, I am with you alway—my grace is sufficient for thee; my strength is made perfect in weakness." Do you dread the hardships and perils of the warfare? Hear Paul, the pioneer and apostle to the Gentiles—"None of these things move me; neither count I my life dear to me, so that I may finish my course with joy, and the ministry which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God." True, indeed, if you would be faithful, you must expect to endure hardship, as a good soldier; but the end will be glorious, and the reward sure. "They that win souls are wise; and they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever."

The disproportion between the labourers in the Lord's vineyard, and the harvest of souls to be

gathered into the fold of Christ, is truly appalling. How and when, at this rate, is the world to be evangelized? Let Christians lay this matter seriously to heart. However it may be in other denominations, we know that in our own (Presbyterian) branch of the church, our candidates for the ministry are not more numerous now than they were two years ago; while the Macedonian cry, from all points of the compass, is, "Come over and help us." May the great Lord of the harvest visit our churches, schools, and colleges, by the power of the Spirit, and call forth labourers into his harvest, that all flesh may see the salvation of our God, and the world be filled with his glory!